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Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons

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Southeast Asia both chronologically and by activity. In fact, every naval community involved is discussed or depicted—from Seabees to chaplains, from harbor pilots to pig breeders (civic action personnel). The photographs selected are both historically illustrative and representative, and as a collection they are of prize-winning quality. Likewise, the marriage between word and image is a fruitful one.

Unlike other attempts to explain the naval operations in Vietnam, the author's approach is not piecemeal. The carrier air bombing campaign, the surface gun line, the amphibious, logistics and sealift efforts, and the river war are all placed in context as a cohesive and mutually supporting whole. Quite frankly, the book is more understandable than the actual Vietnam strategy itself, and it benefits from the fact that Marolda has previously written more scholarly works on the subject. No footnotes here, but there is an excellent selected bibliography for the reader who is interested in acquiring more depth in the subject.

While much of the history presented is as upbeat as any interpretation of a lost war could possibly be, controversy is not altogether avoided. For example, the author has included mention of Vice Admiral James Stockdale's interpretation of the incident that prompted the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, i.e., that the attack did not really happen. Marolda, basing his views on ship's logs and tracking data, has long held that the reported North Vietnamese attack probably did occur.

Those of us who have heard the running Stockdale-Marolda debate (usually conducted by proxy) at historical conferences have an appreciation for the author's intellectual honesty, shown by his inclusion of the alternative interpretation. I hope that does not mean future conferences will be boring! As a side note, the Stockdale version, based on his pilot's-eye view, has frequently been backed by the former editor of the *Naval War College Review*, Bob Laske, who was an intelligence officer near the scene.

However that may be, the book's best attribute is that it is not geared to the professional historian; it is more "user friendly" than that. As the "cruise book" they never got, *By Sea, Air, and Land* would appeal to every Navy Vietnam veteran, and it is also an excellent introduction to recent naval history for their children and grandchildren. The pictures will retain anyone's interest, and the text is a great source for student term papers.

If you served as a sailor in Southeast Asia or know someone who did, *By Sea, Air, and Land* is definitely the book you want.

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Hemingway, Al. *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994. 189pp. $25

One could dismiss this book as a series of unrelated vignettes about the Marine Corps Combined Action Program in Vietnam, but that would be a mistake. It is a unique book: a bit of a collage, but with structure, it provides first-hand

accounts of the war by members of the combined-action Marines. A brief biography of each person interviewed is given.

Hemingway divides the book into three components: origins of the program, 1965–1967; Tet, 1968; and the wind-down, 1969–1971. He presents a brief overview of each period, followed by a series of interviews with those who served in some capacity with the Combined Action Program. Unfortunately, the author provides little information about his methodology. One gets the feeling that the interviews were the result of chance rather than scientific sampling. Nevertheless, Hemingway makes good use of the available literature, such as the official histories, supplemented with references to works by those who were there, as well as a mixture of original sources.

Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, USMC, Retired, one of the most important supporters of combined action, wrote the foreword. He convincingly makes the case that the program's emphasis on the people in the countryside stands in stark contrast to the search and destroy strategy of the larger units, formulated by General William Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

Beginning in August 1965, a squad of Marines and a Navy Corpsman were sent to the South Vietnamese Popular Forces (PF) and Regional Forces (RF) units located in the myriads of hamlets and villages surrounding various Marine bases. The concept behind the program was that by their example and discipline, the Marines would teach basic military tactics to the poorly trained militia. In return, information would be traded about the local terrain, the society, and the communist forces. In 1969 and early 1970, at the height of the program, the combined-action force consisted of four groups, twenty companies, and over two thousand Marines and corpsmen serving in 114 combined-action platoons. Considering that the Marine strength was at its highest point in 1968 (approximately 80,000 out of a total force of nearly 500,000 American troops), this was indeed a relatively small investment of men.

After reading the twenty-seven interviews, I was left with mixed impressions. To a large extent, outside the fact that all the interviewees were in one way or the other connected with the Combined Action Program, there is no unifying theme. Most of the former Marines are divided about their feelings about the Vietnamese. Some describe them as useless, undisciplined, and not to be trusted—some actually tell about armed confrontations between the PFs and the Marines. For the most part, however, most of the Marines had some sympathy for the Vietnamese rural population, and despite references to "gooks," several of the program members refer to themselves as "gook lovers." One even states that "we [Americans] were the gooks. We were foreigners in their land."

Was combined action the harbinger of a strategy that if extended nationwide might have won the war, or was it merely a futile gesture in a failed war that should never have been fought? Neither Hemingway nor his Marines can agree on an answer.

In a brief concluding section, Hemingway argues that similar units have a potential that should be considered by military planners for future U.S. low-intensity conflicts, but he does acknowledge that the Vietnam experience was very mixed—the Marines never came near to pacifying the countryside.

These oral histories are the book's core, and their ring of authenticity compensates for the author's rather lackluster analysis. Yet despite its limitations, this work has obvious value for both the military historian and the military professional.

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Anderson, Burton, F. *We Claim the Title.* Aptos, Calif.: Tracy Publishing, 1994. 428pp. $14.95

Korea, 1950 to 1953. Is it "the Forgotten War"? I think not. While not nearly as well publicized as World War II, which preceded it, or Vietnam, which followed it, the Korean War is nonetheless well represented in hundreds of books, dozens of which cover the major battles and developments of the war quite nicely. With few exceptions, however, most of those books are about grand strategy and the overall conduct of the war—precious few have managed to capture the essence of small unit actions or the stuff of war in foxholes. *We Claim the Title* does exactly that. It stands as an important contribution to the literature of the Korean War.

Korea is often cited as America's first *limited* war, at least in the modern era. It was limited geographically to the Korean Peninsula, limited in terms of American national commitment (the U.S. maintained a very cautious watch on developments in Europe during the entire conflict), and limited in the use of weapons (most notably the U.S. decision not to employ the atomic bomb). However, for the U.S. fighting man in a foxhole, and particularly the more than 103,000 who were wounded, nearly four thousand who were taken captive, the two thousand still unaccounted for, and the more than 54,000 who gave their lives, Korea was indeed a *total* war in its most brutal sense.

Anderson reconstructs that sense of brutality through the exploits of D ("Dog") Company and other small units of the 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, from March through September 1951, the second year of the war. This timeframe is notable in that it marked the end of the "war of movement" and the beginning of the "static war" of position. The armistice talks officially began in July 1951 at Kaesong and moved to Panmunjom in October, by which time it was perfectly clear to both sides that a negotiated settlement would be hammered out along the existing battle lines (more or less astride the 38th parallel, the prewar demarcation line between North and South Korea)—hence the decision to "dig in" and wait out the talks. Artillery duels, small unit actions, patrols, and some very heated battles for hills and ridges occurred during the last two years of the war, but overall, Korea became a battlefield reminiscent of World War I trench warfare. And just as in the earlier